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Bridging the gap: a synthesis of the literature in relation to the impact of work placements on student learning

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Abstract

This paper, presented as an essay, has been developed from a Masters dissertation that examined the impact of work placements on student learning development. Presented here is a synthesis of papers that informed the approach to the study. It examines the literature in relation to student perspectives on work placements, reflecting on aspects such as its relationship with enhancing employability and prospects, resilience and the social significance of workplace learning.

Keywords

work placements; employability; enterprise; career readiness; resilience

Introduction

This paper, presented as an essay, has been developed from a Masters (MRes) dissertation, completed at the Letterkenny Institute of Technology in Ireland. The study itself examined the impact of work placements on student learning and development. A longitudinal and case study approach was adopted, that offered a rich sense of the experiences and perceptions of eight Irish HE students, drawn from four different disciplines, during their respective undergraduate work placements. This paper is a synthesis of papers that informed the approach to the study. It examines the research in relation to student perspectives on work placements, reflecting on aspects such as its relationship with enhancing employability and prospects, resilience and the social significance of workplace learning.

Employability skills within the context of student work placements

The relationship between employability and work-based learning is not straightforward, not least in relation to students' emotional and psychological responses, in their willingness and their ability, to engage in some form of reflective learning, and in their ability to reflect upon their experiences. The value of the student placement, both to the potential employer and the potential employee, and indeed to the educational institution involved in arranging and overseeing the activity, has been fairly well-documented. For instance, the 2011 *Pay and Progression for Graduates Survey* found that year-long sandwich placements were highly valued by employers and students alike, and confirmed that these were often an important factor in the long-term, not least in relation to improving students' chances of eventually gaining a graduate position

(Lowden et al., 2011; Mendez and Rona, 2010).

Employability itself may be defined as those skills which can be most clearly related to the ability to move self-sufficiently within the labour market, in order to realise potential through sustainable employment (Hillage and Pollard, 1998). In other words, the term refers conceptually to a wide range of key skills combined with an underpinning knowledge of what will most likely be required in order to become employed within a given, specific sector. In relation to the graduate market, the number of graduates hired by organisations featured in *The Times* Top 100 Graduate Employers rose by 7.9 per cent in 2014 (HighFliers, 2015). Competition for vacancies remains fierce; employers increasingly expect maturity and wisdom from candidates, often beyond their achievements in terms of academic success. As such, visible and meaningful employability skills are a key factor within the graduate labour markets, as more companies are, not just looking for qualification, but actively expecting graduates to demonstrate a broad range of skills and qualities such as team-working, communication, leadership, and critical thinking. Thus, the ability to clearly demonstrate employability skills is seen as vital in allowing graduates to deal successfully with the various "challenges of an increasingly flexible labour market" (Lowden et al., 2011: 3).

Work placements are encouraged at university or college and some suggest there is a largely positive relationship between work placements and the development of employability skills (Wilton, 2014). As Atfield et al. (2009) have argued, within some sectors a graduate who has completed a year in placement, may be seen as a key

asset since they have gained important, work-related experience and skills, as well as the requisite academic qualifications. That said, Driffield et al. (2011) have contended, it may be difficult to determine exactly whether (and indeed how) placements lead to better academic performance; stronger students may opt for, and subsequently cope with, the challenges of the work placement. Jones and Higson (2012) have, similarly, highlighted the significance of determining the type of students that opt for placements, and argued the need to explore why they have chosen this pathway towards learning and employability skills.

As Knight and Yorke (2006) observed, the responses of the HE sector to government pressures encouraging the development of human capital as a source of national economic well-being are, in many ways, inadequate. Their analysis of employability indicates that it tends to necessitate a process of complex learning, and what is needed is an increase in the likelihood of that style of learning to be matched within the workplace during the placement. The lesson for educators here is that there is often some mismatch between employability policies and the fragmentary approaches taken to work towards the necessary skills that underpin the concept of employability. Knight and Yorke also point to a re-conceptualisation of employability, as understood by government, educators, and graduates seeking employment in the labour market. They suggest that there is a strong dichotomy between the skills that employers are looking for and those that are considered a priority by educators. The overall conclusion is that complex learning needs to be embedded across an entire undergraduate programme if students are to be truly successful in making strong claims in relation to their employability skills. It may not have implications for what teachers teach in terms of their specialist subjects, but it should influence the way in which

they teach their subjects ensuring that they are consistent with the curricular intentions of the designed programme learning environment.

Student experiences

Mendez and Rona (2010) analysed how the work-based components of sandwich degrees tend to contribute to improvements in students' academic performances. By applying statistical tools and building upon other longitudinal research (*cf.* Mandilaras, 2004; Gomez et al., 2004), they test the validity of the assertion that those students who have undertaken an industrial or professional placement often go on to achieve a higher degree classification. The analysis of the data in the study indicates a strong relationship between completing an industrial placement and improved results in the final year of an engineering degree. The authors go on to state that this positive evidence, in favour of industrial experience, should be used to inform best practice for educators: vocational degree programmes should have embedded within them, significant scope for work-based learning opportunities.

Boud and Middleton (2003) examine the roles of the various players in the process of learning at work. Using data that had been captured from different areas of work across a large organisation, they look at 'communities of practice' to conceptualise such workplace learning and suggest that other forms of conceptualisation are also needed. Their study included analysis of findings of previous studies (*cf.* Garrick, 1998) which contended that systematic learning is at times less important than informal learning, suggesting that informal learning methods are predominant in terms of skills-embedding and that formal training can, at times, be less relevant psychologically. They draw attention to the expectations that can exist or arise around

workplace supervisors and their potential inability to best foster embedded, deep learning, owing to the various constraints of their roles, and to the formal nature of their responsibilities for staff, which can have wider implications for the building up of trust levels between each of the parties involved. The research examines how participants within differing workgroups learn with and from each other, but questions whether the framework of communities of practice is a useful or sufficient framework for framing discussions of informal learning at work. It posits that informal learning often goes unacknowledged within organisations and, therefore, it is important to make this work visible in the workplace so that its value can be recognised and enhance the work experience.

The Roadmap for Employment Academic Partnership (REAP) (2011), looks at differing perspectives, from various stakeholders, on the issue of work placements in Ireland. The research conducted for the REAP project found that all of the students involved considered their work placements "to develop independence and self-confidence, and ability to put their theoretical knowledge into practice" (p. 4). Mansfield (2011) argues, year-long industrial placements can include a useful level of 'workplace knowledge' and lead to increased employability. Whether the academic performance of students who have undertaken such a placement is significantly improved once they have returned to university has been the focus of several studies, all using a variety of differing data analysis approaches. Mansfield looks at the difficulties that often accompanied the task of identifying differences in academic performances for students who were engaged in such work placements. Focussing on 417 property management and development graduates, his approach sought to 'correct' previous academic performance,

but ultimately found that considerable improvement occurred in respect of the final year marks of those students who had returned from such a placement. In essence, the study highlights that not every student will experience an improvement in their final year academic performance as a result of engagement with a sandwich degree course. Qualitative work with students, to gain detailed feedback, seems particularly useful in attempting to discover which aspects of the experience are likely to be especially important in relation to improving their performance academically. There have been quantitative studies, aimed at determining if a 'placement effect' exists, but these, according to Mansfield, have not looked to the question of why such an effect may exist.

Eden (2014), examines the learning reported by undergraduate Geography and Environmental Management students on part-time unpaid work placements arranged via the University of Hull. The article considers the transfer of knowledge, with particular attention paid to the student's capacity to meet various 'emotional challenges', nudging people out of their 'comfort zone' to prove they are capable of tackling and dealing with a range of unfamiliar tasks and situations in the workplace. In Eden's view this reflects a "current turn away from employability skills to whole person models of experiential learning that see employability as integrative, reflective and transitional," (Eden, 2014: 266). Reflective essays completed by the 26 students on the placement are examined, which serve to demonstrate the 'whole learning' experience. However, Eden points to the shortcomings of this approach in that the students may feel inclined to give more favourable responses as the essays are written in hindsight and motivated by gaining credits. There is also a consideration of the difference in terms of employability outcome between placements

arranged by the University and those which the students have secured.

Self-perception and holistically supportive approaches

The emphasis on a holistically supportive approach echoes the findings in Eraut's research on work-based learning, which describes a project on early career learning by professionals (engineering graduates, nurses, trainee chartered accountants) (Eraut, 2007; Eraut, 2011). Eraut highlighted the self-perceptions of participants, especially in relation to whether they see themselves as either learners or workers. Eraut found that confidence plays a crucial role in early career workplace learning. Confidence enables early career workplace learners to actively seek out opportunities for gathering further knowledge and, in turn, enables them to face the various challenges associated with this type of learning. A culture of support and trust from colleagues, Eraut argues, is thus particularly important for work-based learning, especially in early career stages.

Eraut stressed the need for the "right level of challenge" to be found and directed at the well supported worker-learner (Eraut, 2007: 418). The ability to sustain motivation is also linked to personal agency, ensuring both a sense of choice over activities and a clear sense of progress are also highlighted as central aims for those involved in supporting the early career learner. Eraut concluded by stressing the importance of support and feedback from managers and colleagues. The onus is often on managers to, not only be aware of the different ways in which learners actually obtain knowledge but to, be prepared to actively and holistically 'attend to those factors which enhance or hinder individual or group learning.' (Eraut, 2007:421).

Eraut (2011: 8) examines two substantial research projects funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, from which three questions are posed:

o What is being learned at work?
o How is the learning taking place?
o What factors affect the amount and direction of learning in the workplace?

The results are revealing. Participants learn much more 'on the job' than by formally organised learning events. An exploration of modes of learning at work suggest that if the correct conditions are created, learning opportunities in the workplace could be further developed and enhanced via the range of work processes involved. Working alongside others offers the opportunity for questions to be asked and answered, as well as for clarification and direction to be given. Factors which directly affect workplace learning include the importance of support and feedback for engendering 'confidence, learning, retention and commitment, especially during the first few months when they are best proved by the person on the spot' (Eraut, 2011: 9).

De Vos and De Hauw (2010) examine the nature of the various relationships between competency development, employability and career success. They test of a model that looks at: employee participation in competency development initiatives; support for competency development; self-perception of employability; and indicators of subjective career success, such as satisfaction and marketability. It surveyed over 500 employees in a financial services organisation and confirms that employee participation within competency development initiatives, as well as support for competency development, impact positively upon an employee's sense of their own employability and marketability. In respect of the issues of employability and career success, the study observes that these have largely evolved in parallel with each

other, as opposed to developing together. Pointing to the unique nature of the study, the authors recognise that there is limited research or evidence on how employability and career success are clearly related to, or distinct from, each other.

'Learning habit' and combined skills as enhanced employability

Choy's study on transformational learning (2009) looks in detail at how the transformative approach has influenced changes to practice, processes and the organisational culture. It examines a group of 12 worker-learners at an Australian university. As she posits, "Transformative learning transcends skills acquisition to affect changes in frames of reference, because individuals and groups step out of their 'habits of mind'" (Choy, 2009: 66). Subsequent changes in perspective then lead to more creative and innovative practices at work.

In another Australian study, Freestone et al. (2006) look at the impact of work-based learning on Planning students at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The research is particularly concerned with the student experience at work: their hopes and fears, and how they cope with the contrasting situations of the classroom in comparison to the workplace. It attempts to track expectations, looking at knowledge gained over a year-long placement offered as part of a Planning degree. It also draws upon 'a broader survey of work-based learning in planning education and parallel qualitative and quantitative evaluations of the University of New South Wales approach' (Freestone et al, 2006: 238). The authors suggest that, whilst the results of the survey are important and provide thoughtful and valuable insights, they must be set alongside, and weighed up against, the opinions of other stakeholders, such as employers and the university staff who work

with the students, before, during and after their placement. The authors advise that there must be an understanding of the evolution of the learning experience over time, and need to have appropriate processes in place to counter any uneven or haphazard situations, sometimes evident in placements.

Ferns and Moore (2012) look specifically at how work integrated learning methodologies might contribute to the workforce and the future economic growth of the Australian economy. They highlight that while there is an increasing amount of literature on the subject, much of it has not looked in detail at the nature or quality of the fieldwork assessments and, most importantly, the impact upon, and outcomes for, the students involved. The authors assert that the distinguishing feature of workplace learning is the degree of variation within working situations and the disparities in terms of duration. This presents a lot of challenges in terms of assessment and evaluation. Similarly, despite having good structures in place in terms of adequate preparation, monitoring and the harnessing of collective experiences, the journey of a work-based learner is still largely an individual experience and often quite subjective in nature.

Conclusion

The research examined in this paper identifies a need to instil self-confidence in work-based learners which may be addressed via a holistic management approach, especially in respect of creating supportive, opportunity-rich learning frameworks, aimed at embedding knowledge and relevant experience. Challenges will inevitably arise for work-based learners: it is important to be aware of their pre-conceptions and changing self-perceptions, in terms of gauging whether they are being over or under-challenged during placement,

and in assisting them in recognising their achievements. Holistic approaches also help ensure that different styles of learning are accommodated and that a wider range of knowledge and skills are obtained by participants. As the literature has indicated there are a number of issues that merit further investigation:

o How, or whether, students' perceptions of the concept of employability in itself may be a key factor when engaging in transformative learning activities.
o How learners' emotional or psychological responses to their work experience(s) (positive or negative) might impact upon their ability to develop employability skills (such as resilience, self-confidence or professionalism) in the workplace.
o How students' expectations of their placement opportunities may affect outcomes.

In investigating these issues, it would be highly desirable for an appropriate methodology to be in place; namely qualitative and longitudinal approaches.

HE colleges and universities stand to gain a considerable advantage where they have achieved a demonstrable "employability brand"; providing their graduates with enhanced employment prospects (Rothwell, 2009: 159). Further, as Harvey et al. (1997) have argued, those students who engage with work-integrated learning and skills training are more likely to reflect positively on their university experience and to achieve employment within their chosen profession or industry; the transformative graduate will innovate, inspire others, anticipate and lead changes.

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